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History & Theory Seminar by Chris Luth



landscape of relics in the new digital age, own image

THE THINGS OF INTERNET - PART 1

Relics of a new digital age

Essay by Merle Flügge // May 2016

*The fast-paced digital evolution brought us from a society of 'humans collecting objects' to a society of 'objects collecting humans', that is, objects that collect, share and exchange human data in the 'Internet of Things'. "Our everyday objects are invested with ubiquitous intelligence opening tremendous opportunities for a large number of novel applications that promise to improve the quality of our lives." (Xia, 2012) Objects become tools for applications talking to each other, making our lives more efficient. But will these objects still talk to us? Do these 'objects of efficiency' still allow the experience of a *mémoire involontaire*? And second: How can we establish new meaning and value with our daily life 'Internet of Things'?*

In this essay I am not trying to argue to disconnect objects from the Internet or argue against the 'Internet of Things', but I believe that we have to find new ways of creating meaningful relationships with these objects. Just as the "[c]apitalist commodities are disengaged from their makers and at the mercy of market transactions" (Tsing, 2013), nowadays commodities are disconnected from their users at the mercy of the internet.

I consider the concept of *mémoire involontaire*, coined by Marcel Proust, as a fundamentally important aspect of our relationships with the world and its objects surrounding us. Proust explains the experience of *mémoire involontaire* with his own experience when he once ate a sort of pastry, a madeleine, which made him recall childhood memories and basically bringing him back to the 'essence of his past'. (Rice, 2007: 15-16) "This form of memory is linked to the shocks of momentary experiences that are not registered consciously." (Rice, 2007: 15) In

that sense, this form of unaware memories is deeply rooted within our life's memory and can therefore evoke profound connections between objects and us.

According to Sam Jacob in "Life before objects" we have a reciprocally bond with objects and things surrounding us: "The invention of things redrew the relationship between humanity and nature, transformed humans-as-creatures into cultural beings. We might suggest, then, that it was objects that made us human, just as much as we made them objects." (Jacob, 2015: 15) Connecting Sam Jacob to 'The Internet of Things' and to Baudrillard's view on consumerism that we "no longer acquire goods because of real needs but because of desires that are increasingly defined by commercials and commercialized images" (Purdue n.d.) it is worth arguing, further, that the goods we purchase are the materialization of our own fabricated 'self-brand', our own constructed identity by the use of social media. At

the same time these goods are reading and communicating our 'personal needs and desires' back to its makers, creating a mutual dependence between the object and us. The object, being a commodity itself, turns us into commodities, turning our lives data, identities and behavior into profitable entities and selling it back to us in a close loop. Our relationship with these communicating objects might leave us entangled in a spasm of personalized consumerism. The fast rate in which we consume and use objects might leave no space for us to imprint¹ memory on objects anymore and subsequently, no objects to uncover our life's memories. (Hayles, 2014: 163)

In 'The commodification of self' Joseph E. Davis writes about a major shift that took place in branding goods in the mid-to-late 1980s. Brands did not produce things anymore but 'images'. "A brand became a carefully crafted image" (Davis, 2003); using Baudrillard's concept of 'sign-value' creating cultural

1) As N. Katherine Hayles interprets Vilém Flusser in 'Speculative Aesthetics and Object-Oriented Inquiry' humans "construct their history by manipulating objects and imprinting them with information." (Hayles, 2014)

meaning which is expressed in a commodity. A commodity people love and ultimately worship. This worshipping of a commodity came to a peak when millions of people all over the world were horrified to see a teenager getting the first iPhone 6 released and dropping it on live TV. (*Guardian, 2014*) What does this mean for the value of objects or things? There is a hint in Marx's notion of 'commodity fetishism' to understand the value of this object of worship. Following Marx, Freud and Baudrillard, Tim Dant concludes: "the term fetishism can refer to the relative quality of desire and fascination for an object that is not intrinsic but is nonetheless part of it." (*Dant, 1996: 20*) He notes that within fetish an object holds no constant value but a changing value. "It is assigned through cultural mediations, a circulation of signs, including objects themselves." (*Dant, 1996: 20*) In other words: through 'imaging'. In a way the objects we purchase become the expression of ourselves.

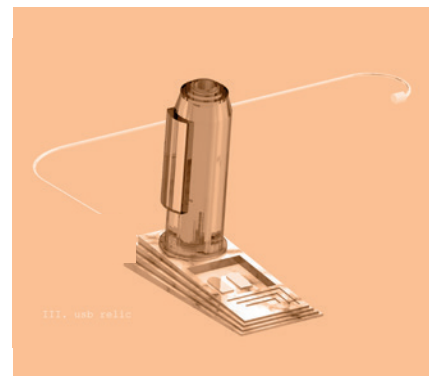
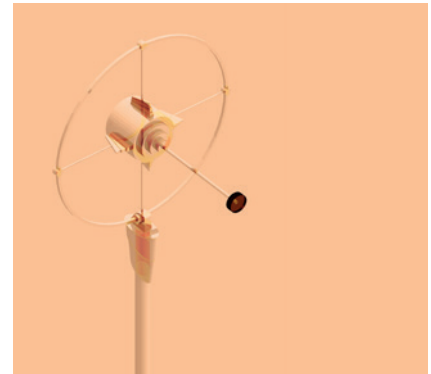
Placing this into the realm of social media and its narcissistic sideeffect, where we ourselves produce these images, and putting 'The Internet of Things' in the equation we might suggest that these objects are augmenting and even feeding our narcissistic behavior. Our relationship with objects might become a purely narcissistic one without sensitivity for our social surroundings. This might seem like a paradox in itself, since the narcissistic individual does need a social surrounding to act out his narcissistic character. However, in this context the

social surrounding is replaced by objects, disconnecting any personal memories from a social surrounding, turning them into augmented memories.

With this understanding of consumerism and our narcissistic relationship with objects as described above, I would like to draw an overlap with our relationship with the 'modern city' as viewed by Walter Benjamin with 'The Internet of Things' and social media influencing our relationship with objects. According to Walter Benjamin "Long experiences (Erfahrung), founded on an appeal and connection to tradition, and accumulation of wisdom over time, comes in conflict with the multitude of momentary, instantaneous experiences (Erlebnisse) that contribute to the dynamic energy of the modern city." (*Rice, 2007: 11*) As the modern city "alienates long experiences" our world of over-stimulated digital connectivity and 'The Internet of Things' makes long experiences impossible and thus, leaving our daily life objects wrested from *mémoire involontaire*.

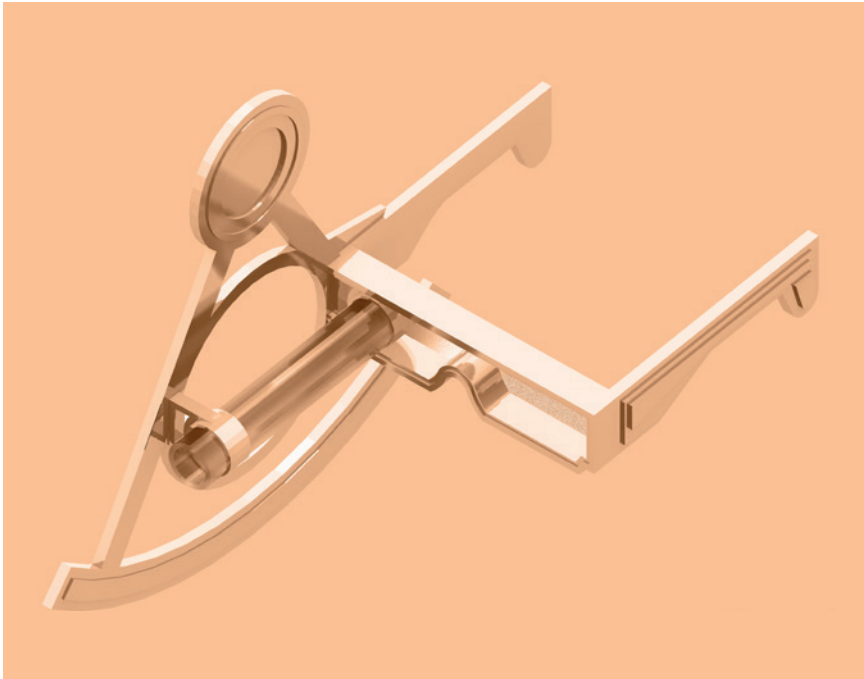
So what does all this mean for our relationship with objects in 'The Internet of Things'? In "The Emergence of the Interior" Charles Rice notes that "the fate of objects-become-commodities is that they begin to repossess the categories they seemingly obliterated: they produce a new nature and begin to have their own social relations." (*Rice, 2007: 12*) So, by owning a commodity, making it ours, it becomes an object again due to the memories we imprint on it over

time. In our fast rate consumerist society, in which 'The Internet of Things' is a profound contributor, objects should exceed the aspect of accumulation by desire and fast replaceability.



relics of a new digital age: usb relic (below) and translator relic, own images

In our digitalized world where connectivity by the means of Internet seems to be one of the most important aspects of our societal needs, we should consider a design strategy with new design tools where the Internet is not just being inserted into objects for the sake of mere efficiency and connectivity that feed our consumerist and narcissistic character traits. Instead, the Internet should be used as a new context to enable *mémoire involontaire* as an intrinsic value embedded into the design of objects. A shift of perspective: from 'The Internet of Things' to 'The Things of Internet'.



relics of a new digital age: navigator relic, own image

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The Things of Internet -Part 1

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THE THINGS OF INTERNET - PART 2

Relics of a new digital age

Essay by Merle Flügge // June 2016

Consider this: In 1980 the release of the Sony Walkman enabled us to experience the urban space in a profoundly different way. It virtually created a personal bubble that would from now on surround us wherever we go. "It allowed the wearer to create their own portable micro-environment, and it provided a soundtrack for travel through the city, encouraging different readings of familiar settings. It functioned as an urban interface." (Dunne & Raby, 2001: 45) By means of the Walkman our state of interiority as experienced outside our homes got catalyzed and intensified. One might think the same about how our smartphones effect us in public space, but there is a profound difference. I would argue that our smartphones (and similar devices) are in fact completely obliterating our state of interiority, and thus stripping us of our inner space of reflection. How is it that such devices can have this opposite effect on our state of interiority? Answering this question might lead to a more profound understanding of our relationship with objects in our digitalized world.

In a recent talk at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (Sennett, 2012) Richard Sennett links *interiority*, as the notion of subjectivity, as an inner space of reflection, to the exterior, public space, rather than the interior. He explains how historically the concept of *interiority* developed in the mid 18th century, where a new ideal of domesticity emerged, which dictated new interior spaces divided by separate functions and a clear distinction between private and public. This new notion of domestic privacy led to the conventional understanding of domestic interiors as shelters, where subjective reflection is set free. (Sennett, 2012)

He then goes on and declares *interiority* to be much more than this typical understanding of a withdraw from the outside world. Sennett is much more interested in linking *interiority* to the public space in a sense that "it is not a detachment from the world, [...] [but more of] a particular kind of relationship with the world, one which is reflexive and [...] one

that allows the work of memory to go on, because under public conditions the work of memory can be floating and intermittent." (Sennett, 2012) For Sennett, this reflexive thinking is particularly specific to the urban space, as he goes on to analyze how only in the outside space "you are released from *Gemeinschaft*¹ and the physical stimulation of other people" (Sennett, 2012) (family members, partners, room mates etc.). With the aspect of 'observational cruising' he adds the aspect of the eye being busy observing the surroundings without taking in anything particular, and thus creating an inner space for interiority.

Against the background of this concept of *interiority* as drawn by Richard Sennett, it can be argued that our ubiquitous use of smartphones connecting us constantly with our (virtual) social networks, leads to an obliteration of *interiority* as a whole. Through smartphones we literally take the *Gemeinschaft* with us in our

pockets. *Gemeinschaft* might now not stimulate us in our domestic spaces as much anymore, but demands just as much or even more attention in its virtual stimulation. In that sense the "tyranny of intimacy" (Sennett, 2012) through *Gemeinschaft* is reinforced instead of temporally escaped.

Our "position in the world is always mediated and filtered by our relationship with objects. Through them we understand ourselves better; they give us the elements for a cartography of our own mutable identity." (Marenko, n.d.: 241) We even assign human qualities to some of our objects. I am especially interested in this concept of animism. It is a specific category of objects where we tend to project human qualities upon, namely those which become an extension of our own capabilities or those which give us pleasure, "in a process that turns stuff into a prosthetic arrangement without which we would not even begin to be who we are." (Marenko, n.d.: 241) It is not a chair or a cabinet we assign

1) Following the German thinker Ferdinand Tönnies, Richard Sennett defines *Gemeinschaft* as a community. This community needs a 'common identity' and concurrent feelings of value and self-worth. An example of *Gemeinschaft* is a family or a group of close friends with relationships based on emotion and compassion.

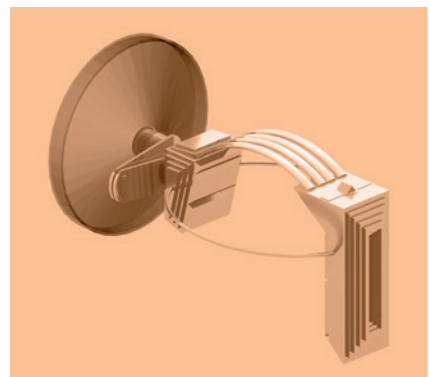
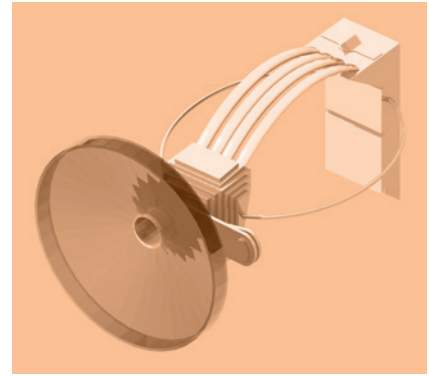
human-like qualities to, it is usually our cars, bikes, printers, and of course, our smartphones that we talk and give names to. They turn into something that designer Andrea Branzi calls “domestic pets capable of protecting the inhabitants from evil spirit and wrongdoers.” (Marenko, n.d.: 245) Betti Marenko writes about how our smartphones are objects “which we give our undivided attention and in which we make an intense emotional investment.” (Marenko, 2014: 221) She goes on in stating that our “smartphone becomes an extension of our own cognition and emotions. Because of this animated and responsive presence, we often end up treating our smartphone as if it is alive.” (Marenko, 2014: 221)

Placing this understanding of animistic human-object relationships into the context of the Internet of Things in our homes, we might end up treating our whole interior as a living being: *the animistic interior*. “Now it is the house that literally becomes more human – or at least ‘flesh’ like – while the humans inside it become more integrated into the systems of objects within it. [...] If the central spaces of monopoly capitalism – the factory, store, and office – turned social relationships into object relations, these post-Fordist homes of the future turn object relations into social relations. In the smart house things relate to things. Your microwave talks to your TV dinner, and you – somewhere offsite – cell phone home to reach out and touch your fridge.” (Berry, Kim & Spiegel, 2010: 65)

Following this line of thinking, ‘The Internet of Things’ opens up an interesting perspective and forces us to look again at the concept of *interiority* as understood by Richard Sennett. Whereas Sennett’s view on *interiority* in urban space focuses on the possibility of escapism of *Gemeinschaft* and is clearly limited to the relations between people, bringing the Internet of Things in the equation brings us to unlimited relations between humans and objects and between objects and objects.

In that sense, it is also particularly interesting to reflect upon Sennett’s view on *interiority* since the aspect of escaping the domestic “tyranny of intimacy” (Sennett, 2012) by being in public space is - at least in Western society - becoming increasingly insignificant. In our more and more individualistic and digitalized society, where the concept of *Gemeinschaft* might not apply anymore in the traditional sense and where there is the outlook of an increasingly strong bond with the IoT surrounding us, it is worth arguing that the *Gemeinschaft* will be expanded by new characters of interconnected domestic objects. Objects that create an even closer loop of social and functional information exchange similar to our relation with the people close and dear to us. “Due to the large number of applications the IoT has the potential to replace people as the largest consumer and producer of information on the Internet.” (Mukhopadhyay & Suryadevara, 2014: 1) It looks like the concept of *Gemeinschaft* will be drastically altered by our relationship with

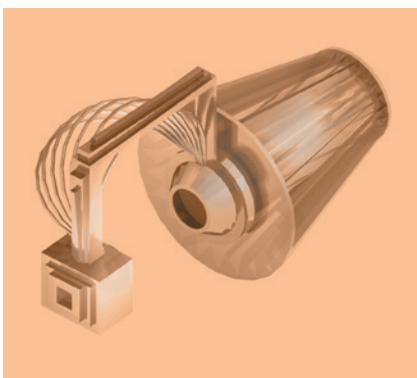
IoT objects.



relics of a new digital age: identity scanner, own images

In my essay ‘The Things of Internet - Part 1’ I suggested that we should use the Internet as a new context to enable *mémoire involontaire* as an intrinsic value embedded in the design of objects, shifting our perspective from ‘The Internet of Things’ to ‘The Things of Internet’. Taking this literally, one could mistakenly conclude that we should put emphasis on the Internet inside the object rather than the object itself, treating the object just as a device. In that case we would still design conventional objects and forcefully connect them to the Internet, which is already happening with refrigerators and thermostats. Like Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby already stated in “Design Noir: The secret Life of Electronic Objects” we are

just designing “semiotic skins for incomprehensible technologies. [...] There are hundreds of variations on the original Walkman, but the relationship it created with the city remained the same.” (Dunne & Raby, 2001: 45) What this implies is that designers did not look closer at the relationship the object created between the user and the environment, but designed just on the basis of new technology and fashion. The same goes later for Discmans, Mp3-players and smartphones. Another example would be the refrigerator. Our fridges will change through the IoT from devices that keep our food fresh and cool, to obscure portals connecting us to every supermarket in the city. In my view it should then not look like a typical fridge anymore but rather emphasize this new portal-like relationship in its design. On top of that, as stated in my previous essay, we are rapidly exchanging new devices with every new technological improvement. The ‘every year a new phone’ campaign from Vodafone blatantly sums this up.



If our current digital devices are merely disposable things with just frivolous semiotic skins, it is

interesting to explore the opposite: new designs of (IoT) objects in a way we look at *object-relics*. The designed objects should be viewed as a new type of relic: relics of a new digital age. Relics, not in the sense of something cherished for an old age or historic interest, nor objects of religious veneration, but rather objects that “possess a borderline status in between different realms, for example, [...] between here and elsewhere” (Marenko, n.d.: 247), or the physical and the virtual. Similar to a typical relic our ‘digital-object relics’ would be “memory prosthetics to the extent to which the capital of knowledge, affects, emotions and identification opportunities they embody is reactivated by each round of ownership”. (Marenko, n.d.: 252) With the IoT we need to establish a new category of objects. Designers of future IoT objects should take the fundamental change of our relationships with interior and exterior spaces as a determining starting point. For example: object-relics that can catalyze our state of *interiority* rather than diminish it.

This leaves us with an exciting question: what would a Walkman have looked like if the designers had not taken the aspect of its innovation as a main starting point - a portable audio device - but rather used its transforming effect on our relationship with the surroundings as the main foundation for its design? Through this, our design approach changes from a merely semiotic tool to a more existentialist methodology, opening up new relations and values.



relics of a new digital age: filter headphone, own image

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